

In search of the bluest sky

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CHAPTER I

The rains had arrived. The sky had just that grayish shade, strewn with dark clouds that characterize the monsoon. There could be sensed in the air, promise of a rich and fulfilling shower that was not only desired but deeply needed, after a hot Indian summer.

Jiya was arranging some of Neeli's clothes, from the almirah when Neeli stumbled into the room, wearing a blue *salwar kameez* that looked slightly loose and shapeless on her lithe body.

“Gypsy”, cried out Neeli, “I need your help. You have to fit out this dress for me if I am to wear it to Priti’s engagement party tomorrow. Maa does have an eye for pretty clothes for sure but she always assumes me fatter than I am”

“Jiya *Pishi*”, that simple old fashioned call had been distorted by the childish tongues of Neeli’s mother and aunt to ‘Jipshi’ and further refined to the bohemian expression of ‘gypsy’. So here she was, an aged lady of sixty plus years, cheerfully as well as seriously described as ‘Gypsy’ and the tradition so neatly passed down to Neeli that she never knew this no-nonsense ,honest member of her household by any other name but Gypsy.

Jiya had come as a helper when Neeli’s grandmother, Mrs. Anjalika Roy, had been pregnant with her twin daughters-Rashi and Trisha. She had stayed on as not only a nursemaid but graduated steadily over the years to become one of those not-blood but thicker-than-water relationships, only long term ,loyal servants develop in a homely household.

Always referred to as Gypsy by her twin wards, the name had so caught on that even Anjalika ,in her later years had found it convenient to address her less and less as Jiya and more and more as Gypsy!

Oddly enough, this innovative but evergreen term of endearment had been coined not by the effervescent Rashi but the rather quiet and controlled Trisha.

Being an outsider and yet so much a part of the inside life of the Roy family, Jiya had often taken an individualistic view of the each of the twin daughters, instead of the handy collectivization ,adopted by many people, who referred to them as simply the ‘twins’.

Yet, the strange part was that Rashi and Trisha, as twins, had disappointed most of their acquaintances. A society, that grew up on stories of ‘comedy of errors’ and movies like ‘*Sita aur Gita*’, Rashi and Trisha offered no romance at all. They were as different as chalk and cheese, with Rashi being always described as the soft and desirable cheese while Trisha as the hard, chalky one.

Now, as Jiya raised her eyes to take a critical look at Neeli's dress, she could not but observe, as how less Neeli resembled her own mother Rashi and how much more her aunt Trisha.

She had the hard, aquiline facial features coupled with Trisha's severe black and bouncy mass of shiny hair. Nowhere, were the soft lines of Rashi's pretty countenance or the attractive black curls that had won Rashi so much of her adulation.

Yet, it was not that Trisha, or for that matter Neeli, were anyway devoid of attractiveness but while Rashi's beauty was the eternally-loved fuzzy kind of sweetness, there had always been a kind of sharpness and sparkle about Trisha's beauty which called for evaluation along with admiration. Maybe, that was the reason why most people took the easy way out and simply preferred Rashi, describing her as the sweetest lovable creature while dismissing her twin sister as nice but somewhat cold.

Jiya, as well as their mother Anjalika, in their affection and duty for both, would never have accepted that they preferred one to another but in their own private moments, they must have concluded that it was easier to love Rashi and be done with it than to take on the difficult task of having to admire Trisha's self-dependence and austerity. Only Trisha's father had, to some extent, been able to appreciate the hidden depths in his unconventional daughter.

"Oh! Well, it would not be so much of a problem, if you ate a little more, without bothering about maintaining that precious zero-figure all the time! Anyway, get my needle and thread box and maybe you can arrange the clothes for a change", answered Jiya, with a commanding look.

"I guess I must and I will if those are your orders." sighed Neeli, but with a bright smile.

Neeli rushed out of the room and returned with the required box; having changed into one of her cotton t-shirts and faded jeans that made her look slimmer and sharper.

The next fifteen minutes were spent in pure tailoring as Jiya, the experienced hand, took some mental measurements and got down to work on the dress,. After, she had sewn a loose line of stitch, on the sides of the dress, Neeli was ordered to put it on and verify if the present contracted size was okay and after the necessary dress rehearsal, Jiya got down to taking off the loose stitches and running the final stitches under the old sewing machine.

"Tell me honestly Gypsy; in what do I look best? Westerns or the Indian dresses?" Neeli enquired after a while, as she admired herself in the full length mirror, attached to the almirah, wearing the resized dress.

"All my friends say that I have just the figure to carry off anything but Ma is always chiding me when I wear *sarees*, that I am too thin. Oh! How I would love to look like Ma, when she decks herself in those traditional *sarees*!" said Neeli.

“Well, they said the same thing to your aunt Trisha also that she was too thin for *sarees* to unfold their magic but I never agreed. She looked just lovely when she wore them. Your mother, but knew how to make the most of everything. So while she dressed up to the occasion, Trisha would just wrap herself in something and call it quits.” reminisced Jiya “I and Anju di had to shout down the house to make her add a touch of *kajal* to her eyes or a dash of lipstick to her lips.”

“Tell me more about her, Gypsy. I know so little about my own *mashi*. Now that she is coming to stay with us for a while, I am all curious. Are Maa and Maashi really so different from each other, as everyone says?” asked Jiya.

Neeli had sat down on the bed, while she asked Jiya these questions. Her beautiful black eyes seemed not just to ask but rather desire an in-depth answer, for Jiya, unlike her mother, did not cease at the surfaces but liked to delve deeper.

“Well, yes, they were different”, replied Jiya “Your mother was more the outgoing type while Trisha preferred to stay in her own world of books and hobbies.”

“Do you really think, she was jealous of Maa’s beauty and popularity, as everyone says? I saw her picture the other day and she kind of looked beautiful to me. I mean, not in the way Maa is but in a different way. She has a nice brownish shade to her complexion, even after being in America for so long. And she has really bright, alert eyes.” Neeli described.

Jiya was quiet for moment. She turned away for a second and looked back at Neeli but whatever words were on her lips, died out when her eyes met Neeli’s. They were so like Trisha’s eyes, that she might have been mistaken for Trisha herself. Even the careless poise of her young body was the same, the same eager-for-a story look in her eyes and yet the steely tilt of her head, which seemed to declare that though she was always absorbing facts from her surroundings, she would nevertheless have her own take on everything. No fairy tales with damsels in distress, rescued by handsome knights, for her. If she were to be the protagonist in a story, it would be the tale of a strong woman, possessing both courage and intelligence.

“A little bit of jealousy is always common among siblings and more so between twins, so maybe she was”, Jiya tried to give a shrug but sensed that her shrug was not careless enough.

Neeli was silent for a minute, as if thinking and then spoke again. “Do you think if Trisha *mashi* had decided, she could have actually made herself more attractive than Maa? After all, it is not that she was not good looking, you know.”

“What a thought, Neeli! Sisters do fight for the same things, but it is hardly commendable that they should consciously try to outdo each other. You make it sound like a war”, Jiya’ simple heart was disturbed.

“Yes, I know but everyone seems to be so prejudiced towards her. Don’t you think Mashi would have simply got fed up of being compared to her prettier sibling all the time? Maybe, that is why she went off to America, to be by herself.” Neeli persisted.

“Well, lots of people go to study or work in America. Trisha had all the freedom she needed, here. She did not need to run off to America to be herself”, Jiya’s tone had now become defensive.

“I hope she likes it here and I hope I like her too.” said Neeli.

“There is absolutely no reason why she should not like it here. She is not a stranger here. This is her sister’s home and you know she is fond of you”, Jiya retorted “why! Does she not send you and Rashi, lovely gifts on each of your birthday?”

“Yes, she sends lovely gifts. In fact, she always seems to know exactly what would appeal to me! Better than Ma ever does”, agreed Neeli in a thoughtful voice and then added, “Still, I cannot help but wonder about her. Maa says that in last twenty years, she has visited India only a few times although in one of her visits, she did stay pretty long and even went on a vacation with Maa and *Baba*. Did she never feel homesick or miss India? Did she never pine to see her family here?”

It was not usual for Jiya to lose her cool but there was something in Neeli’s words, which were putting her on her guard. She reflected upon Neeli’s words. Yes, she was right. Trisha had visited India only a handful of times, since Rashi’s wedding. The first time, it had been when Rashi had been expecting her first child. Something had gone badly wrong and there had been a miscarriage. Rashi had been devastated. It was then that Aakaash, ever thoughtful and practical, had suggested a trip to Agra and some of the surrounding tourist places. Trisha being present then, had accompanied them. In fact, Trisha had been instrumental in convincing Rashi to go. They had taken quite a long vacation and the trip had proved lucky for Rashi, for when she returned, she was pregnant again. This time, everything went smoothly and she delivered a healthy Neeli, after nine months. Trisha however, had not been able to stay for the delivery. She had had to leave just a few weeks before the delivery, for some urgent business.

Yes, thought Jiya, there had always been a touch of the will o the wisp about Trisha. Here now, gone the next moment!

Maybe because Trisha’s first visit had resulted in such glad tidings Jiya shivered to think of the occasion of her second visit, so wrapped in grief for all of them.

Nevertheless, Jiya had to accept in her honest heart that Neeli was perfectly justified in describing Trisha’s reluctance to visit her homeland, odd. Jiya herself thought the same, especially when Trisha had got married and still not come down to India. Her parents had visited her in USA, two years later when her son had been born but Trisha had never returned, except at the death of each of her parents. This seeming apathy on Trisha’s side had been a sore point with the old parents, in their later years.

Jiya, for her part, had seen Trisha's son grow up only through the photographs that Trisha sent, from America. A nice, clear cut face Neel had, having inherited the sharp angular features of his Indian mother and the warm blue eyes of his American father. The two cousins, so similarly named had never met each other. In fact, Neeli had been disappointed to hear that Trisha was coming alone and not bringing Neel along.

Jiya found herself wondering if Neeli suspected anything. For example, had she noticed that for the past few days, Rashi had been more distracted than usual? She had been spending more and more time, locked up in her room going through her husband's gifts and letters and becoming despondent afterwards? After all, Neeli had the quickness of her aunt and the analytical mind of her father. These qualities coupled with a young girl's instinct could read a lot in the seemingly ordinary instances of daily life!

If Neeli had at all guessed anything, she did not mention that right away, for just then her mother glided into the room.

Rashi never entered any room, she always glided in like one of those princesses in the fairy tales but then who could blame her? Her entire life had been quite like a fairy tale until the unfortunate death of her husband Aakaash. A beauty, since her early childhood, she had always been the popular and admired girl among her friends. She knew she was beautiful but so exceedingly charming was she to everyone that you could not help but think well of her. Above all, she seemed to genuinely care that people should like her and that made everyone feel special.

So, Rashi had had a perfect childhood and the perfect love affair with Aakaash. Even the sequence of events ,that had led up to her engagement and wedding had been a typical fairy tale romance, replete with love letters and her heroic rescue by Aakaash, bringing about Rashi's confession to loving him.

Those letters, Rashi had never shared with anyone, except with Trisha but then you did not need to read every single love letter to know that a man has bequeathed his precious heart to a beautiful girl!

“Even our zodiacs just will us to be together and nothing can satisfy my thirst for you but your love”, so Aakaash had declared and how mercilessly Rashi had been teased about it then. ‘Rashi’, after all was the Bengali word for zodiac and though this had been just a note, in a bouquet, not a letter with a proper addressee, it had been trumpeted to one and all to be the declaration of his love for Rashi.

Maybe, it had been too perfect to survive in this imperfect world and so it had been a sad day, when Aakaash had died in that car accident, Neeli still a toddler. Intelligent and level headed always; he had somehow lost control over his driving that fateful night and died on the spot. Rashi and her entire family had been devastated but eventually, they had pulled through. Rashi's job as lecturer had helped a lot but it had been mainly Jiya and the remaining family's support, which had restored a semblance of normalness in unhappy Rashi's life. Even Trisha had come down from America to share in her sister's grief and for once, everyone had seen the strong Trisha breakdown into helpless sobs.

“Oh well, I am glad to be home. Food was good but could not eat much”, Rashi sighed as she sank into a nearby chair.

“Is the bride pretty looking?” enquired Jiya, for Rashi was just back from attending a wedding reception of one of her colleague’s son.

Being beautiful herself, Rashi’s opinion on the looks of other women were always asked though she rarely gave a negative verdict.

“Yes, a bit too thin though but then girls nowadays are all so thin”, commented Rashi.

“Shall I get something then? Are you hungry?” asked Jiya.

“No, no, I am not hungry. I think I will just change and go to bed. After all, it will be a long day tomorrow”, answered Rashi.

Jiya’s aged eyes followed Rashi out. Rashi’s last comment had made her uncomfortable. It was true that tomorrow promised to be a hectic day but a day when you were about to meet your sibling, after nearly twenty years, should it be described as a long day, she wondered. Should not there be some pleasant anticipation about getting to see your only sister and your twin, for that matter, after so many years? Did years of living apart make strangers of even twin sisters, so that a visit by one of them was nothing more than a long social occasion to be somehow got through?

Jiya shot a cautious look at Neeli, who had got up from the bed and was now looking out of the window. What was Neeli thinking, Jiya wondered? Had it struck young Neeli also that Rashi, when first informed of Trisha’s plan to visit India for a month-long visit, had suddenly got oddly flustered and restless! Rashi’s explanation for this behaviour had been that Trisha, having lived in the states, for the last twenty years, might find Rashi’s apartment too hot and therefore require an AC and other amenities not presently available in her apartment. In fact, she had actually arranged for an AC to be fitted out in the room, made ready for Trisha’s stay and yet Rashi’s restlessness had not diminished and now this strange comment.

Jiya felt uncomfortable herself, as Neeli continued to gaze out of the window. It had started raining outside and from the looks of it, it promised to be a thunder storm.

CHAPTER II

The flight was on time, maybe even a few minutes before time. Of course, thought Rashi, as if the strong Trisha was impatient to get moving and could not be kept waiting.

There she was, pushing her luggage trolley, smoothly and confidently, as she approached Neeli and Trisha, a soft smile spreading over her face, when she spotted them waiting.

Having finally reached them, her entire body seemed to relax, as the two sisters hugged each other warmly, muttering some unimportant nothings. It was only when her eyes moved to Neeli's that a bright light of delightful recognition lit up her face and she let out a soft sound of pleasure.

"Oh! My little Neeli, how you have grown! I hardly know you", Trisha muttered, as she stretched out her hands to hold Neeli by her shoulders.

Neeli had however, not let her curiosity affect her manners and bowed down respectfully to touch her aunt's feet.

The next few minutes, seemed a little long and embarrassing to Neeli, as her gorgeous aunt continued to gaze at Neeli's face, with a look of open admiration and delight.

"Get the car, Neeli. It is getting humid already", urged Rashi, relieving poor Neeli.

The drive home was silent but for some ordinary enquiries on the side of Rashi, regarding Trisha's flight and general comfort. The sense of homecoming of a dear family member did not emerge until the car stopped at the apartment's parking and Jiya came running down the stairs, uttering a cry of delight and enveloping Trisha in a tight embrace of warm affection.

"Trisha, my dear, it is good to see you again. You must be tired after the long journey. Come in, come in. I have some of your choicest dishes waiting for you", announced the beloved Gypsy.

Jiya and Trisha entered the building, talking nineteen to the dozen, with Rashi following them, having first instructed Neeli to bring in the bags.

"They hardly look like sisters, least to say twins", Neeli found herself thinking, as she took out the bags from the car.

CHAPTER III

The monsoons were living up to their name in full. Not a single day went by without drenching the city in generous showers though they failed to keep the heat and humidity away.

Trisha was now comfortably settled in the little household, as far as Neeli was concerned. Shy of her aunt initially, it had not taken Neeli very long to discover that, quiet and thoughtful as Trisha was, it was remarkably easy to talk to her. In fact, she found herself discussing a lot more things with her Aunt Trisha, than she had ever felt comfortable even mentioning to her own mother.

Trisha, for example, never found it strange that Neeli should find some of the young men and women, frequenting their house, rather dull and prefer the simple pleasure of scribbling something in her dairy or taking random photographs of daily objects. She was quick to spot that Neeli had a love of photography and presented her with a smart digital camera, on her birthday, which had followed soon after Trisha's arrival. "You are a Cancerian and they usually have an eye for photography", had been her comment. She could appreciate Neeli's interest in a variety of things without smothering her all the time.

Maybe, Neeli bonded all the more with Trisha because she unconsciously realized the resemblance she shared with her aunt, both in looks and temperament.

Together, they looked at family albums and Neeli gathered poignant snippets about her new relative's life. For example, she was surprised to know that her grandfather had once jokingly suggested that Trisha's name be changed to Trishna, to match her undying thirst for knowledge and life's wonders. He had supposedly said that it would be more appropriate to call Trisha so because 'Trishna' in Bengali means 'thirst' while 'Rashi', meaning zodiac, suited her sister just fine, seeing how much she believed in the infallibility of human destiny.

Neeli did not say so but having met her aunt now, she could not but agree with the accuracy of her grandfather's poetic estimation of his daughters and their names. What pleased Neeli more was Trisha's own confession that the idea had actually appealed to her. She had fancied herself being called Trishna, she confessed. Laughingly, she had reminisced, how much more passionate, she had thought, the name Trishna would be than mere Trisha.

In responding to questions about her son Neel, Trisha, when asked as why she had named her son Neel, had replied that because she loved the sky and had therefore chosen the name 'Neel', which happened to be the colour of the sky most often.

"Looks like our family has a fetish for the colour blue and the sky!" Neeli had chipped in then. "You named your son as Neel and my mother named me as Neeli. That is a lot of blue(neel) to go around."

“Aren’t we all in search of the bluest sky?” Trisha had asked with a laugh. Common as this answer might seem, it had endeared her to Neeli, because of the longing in her voice as she murmured these words

They had gone on then, to discuss the origin of her own name ‘Neelakshi’, which was the combination of the two words “Neel” and “Aakaash”, that had been suitably modified to arrive at the feminine sounding ‘Neelakshi’ and also that it had been a suggestion of Neeli’s father Aakaash.

Trisha also spoke and compared Neeli more with her father than anyone else had ever done.

Having lost her father at a very early age, Neeli hardly had any memories of him. Of course, his photographs she had seen and heard Jiya recount the romantic love affair of her beautiful mother and Aakaash but no one had really ever spoken about the man. The picture that had been painted of him had been more of Rashi’s lover and husband than the personality Aakaash had actually been. Trisha however took a completely different view when they looked through family albums together. She spoke of the person, not the relation. In her young heart, Neeli had always nurtured this special place for her father, who she knew had named her ‘Neelakshi’, combining the words ‘Neel’, meaning blue in Bengali and his own name ‘Aakaash’, that meant the sky. That way, she had justified her secret preference for the colour blue and the lure of the blue sky but hearing Trisha share those preferences, had pleasantly warmed her towards her aunt.

Maybe because she was a self-sufficient person herself, Trisha spoke more objectively about Neeli’s individual likes and dislikes than Rashi had ever encouraged her to.

In Rashi’s view, one could be sure of one’s acceptance and popularity only through the acknowledgement of the others and therefore it was necessary to cultivate their appreciation and ensure that you are liked by people. Rashi sure did believe in the importance of having a good reputation, while Trisha did not seem to attach much importance to it.

Hence, it was not very surprising that when Neeli received her GRE results, her first thought was to share the news immediately with Trisha. It so happened that Rashi, Trisha and Jiya were just then finishing their evening tea when Neeli burst into the room with the news and that she had decided to go to USA for pursuing her Masters degree .

Neeli, who had never breathed a word about moving to another city, suddenly seemed to have made up her mind to travel abroad for her Masters degree. She was hardly done, expounding her future plans when her excitement was cut short by Rashi’s vehement cry.

“No, never. I shall absolutely not allow you to move to USA. No! Not to USA! Never”, she screamed, a desperate look in her eyes.

Neither Neeli nor Jiya had ever seen Rashi so worked up, since the death of Aakaash. She seemed to be beside herself with grief and vexation.

“But why? Why not?” Surprised but nevertheless, undaunted Neeli demanded of her mother.

“Because I have already lost him. I cannot lose you now. It would be just too much. Too much for me!” There was a catch in Rashi’s voice.

Gently but firmly, Neeli put her arms around her mother.

“I can understand your concern for me, Maa but you do not need to worry. I will take care of myself and Trisha Mashi would be there too”, Neeli tried to soothe her distraught mother.

“But, it is just not fair”, protested Rashi, “Didn’t I give birth to you? Haven’t I been a good mother to you? Why must you go away from me then?”

“Of course Rashi, you have been the most excellent mother to Neeli but it is not about you. It is about Neeli. If she is eager for it, there is really no particular reason for not letting her”, urged Jiya in her calm and soothing voice.

“Please Maa, do let me. Going abroad is hardly a big deal nowadays. So, many people do it for either work or study and it is not as if I am just leaving for ever. It will be just a two year program!” urged Neeli.

Rashi looked up at her daughter’s eager face, as if about to say something but the look in Neeli’s eyes stopped her. Gentle, as they were, she knew that look very well. She had seen that expression too many times, to miss the gleam of determination lurking within its softness.

Calming herself, she slowly walked up to the nearest chair. Her hands were still shaking when she grabbed the handle of the chair but by the time, she sat down, she had regained her self control. She closed her eyes for a long moment and the silence seemed to fill the room.

“Well, when is this going to be then?” Rashi asked in an almost normal voice.

CHAPTER IV

The rainy season had enhanced the greenery all around. The trees in our modern cities, so often dirty, from the pollution, acquire such a clean and sparkling look after they have been rain-washed. Even the flowers looked livelier as if they had been given a fresh coat of paint.

Neeli especially, never failed to comment on these pleasant changes brought about by the rains. However, this Saturday, though it was a beautiful morning, Neeli was not feeling too jovial. The reason behind this was that she had promised to accompany her mother to a lunch party at one of Rashi's colleagues' house. Having to go for lunch with your mother's friends is bad enough but what made it worse was that this colleague of Rashi's had always taken a little more than usual interest in Neeli, viewing her as a possible match for one of her favourite nephews. This nephew in question, Neeli found specifically obnoxious and so it was not surprising that she found herself lacking in enthusiasm towards this luncheon party.

The offer to attend this social occasion had been extended to Trisha also but she had of course rejected on grounds of possible boredom, an excuse never accepted by grown-ups, especially by mothers, when they were offered by their children. Neeli had, therefore been cajoled and blackmailed till she had relented and so here she was, ready to embark on the dreaded social invitation.

As she waited for her mother to get ready, she chatted to Trisha, in the kitchen, who, in place of Jiya, was today preparing lunch.

This was because Jiya had a train to catch that afternoon. For some time, she had been hankering to visit a certain religious place, just out of the town. A week back, Rashi had casually mentioned that the Banerjees, in the adjacent apartment complex were going to the same place, for a couple of days and if Jiya wished to join them, the necessary arrangements could be made.

Actually Rashi had been promising to arrange this trip for Jiya for some time but with one thing and the other and Rashi being unwilling to let Jiya travel alone, it had somehow not materialized. The Banerjees, however, were on quite friendly terms with them. In fact, Mr. Banerjee's mother was of the same age as Jiya and therefore it was agreed by all that Jiya would be sufficiently comfortable travelling with them. The necessary arrangements had been made and Jiya was to set out today. At this moment, she was busy, finishing some last minute packing in her own room.

The Banerjees had promised to pick up Jiya, on their way to the railway station and she was to lunch at the station itself, with their family.

Neeli and Rashi already had this lunch invitation to attend, so Trisha had insisted that she would fix a simple American meal for herself, maybe a salad.

In America, this was usual practice for her, Trisha assured them. This arrangement was readily accepted as it was convenient for everybody. So Neeli, who had teased her aunt then, about being Americanized, was now watching Trisha prepare her food.

This American lunch, comprising of a salad and a cheese sandwich, was almost complete. The salad bowl was already laid out on the dining table, in the hall and the sandwich was getting its finishing touches.

“I hope at least the food will be good”, Neeli whispered in Trisha’s ears, as she and Rashi left for the party.

CHAPTER V

Neeli and Rashi could not return home that day. Among all the guests, Rashi's house was the furthest. So, while the other guests had dared to venture out, for their homes, when they thought, the rain might let them, these two were stuck with the hostess and the hostess with them.

Rashi seemed more than agitated about Neeli being able to drive safely in that heavy rain. There was no dearth of hospitality from their hostess side, in offering them bed for a night but Neeli was getting irritated. To add to Neeli's woes, she found that she could not find her mobile too. Rashi too had forgotten her mobile but she ensured her that she had informed Trisha accordingly, though Neeli had no idea when Rashi managed to make the call.

So, here she was stuck in a strange house, with the rain pelting outside and she being bored inside. A few books that her hostess had in her collection were the only saving grace.

Yet, Neeli could sense that Rashi too was oddly uncomfortable. She was getting more fidgety and distracted than she allowed herself to be, in public.

A rainy day, when viewed, through the window of one's own home, in the bosom of one's own family, might be made something of, Neeli thought with a sigh, but was a drag when forced to accept hospitality at somebody else's place.

Finally, it was Sunday evening when the rains did clear up a bit and they could finally drive back home.

"You are looking tired, Maa. Are you not feeling well?" asked Neeli on the drive home.

"No, I am fine", answered Rashi, but the reply had not been prompt.

Neeli gave a curious look to her mother but made no further comment.

The door bell had been ringing for some time. Neeli wondered what was taking Trisha so long to open the door. She pressed it more impatiently a couple of times.

"Rashi! Rashi! Where have you been? Such a dreadful thing has happened." Rashi and Neeli turned round to see the anxious face of their neighbour Mrs. Das.

"What has happened, Aunty?" asked Neeli

"I have been waiting for you to return. Please call Trisha on her mobile. She took Jiya di to hospital. She fell awfully ill, you see."

"What do you mean? Gypsy? When did this happen?" Neeli was alarmed.

"The Banerjees never went on that journey, you know. They suddenly received a telephone call about Mrs. Banerjee's father having a stroke, while they were on the way to railway station. They turned back immediately. So, Jiya didi came back. It was towards the afternoon today that Jiya didi started feeling ill and your aunt took her to hospital. She

tried to call both of you but could not get any of you.” the good woman had blurted out this entire story in a rush and was panting now.

Rashi’s face was white. She seemed too shocked even to speak. Neeli had however, her wits about her. In a moment, she had fished out her own spare key, opened the flat and was dialing Trisha’s number from the landline telephone.

Rashi could hear Neeli’s side of the conversation.

“Yes, mashi. We just returned. We just heard.” A pause, as Neeli listened intently, her face becoming more and more serious. “Yes, we will be there. Ok ok, we are coming.”

There was no time to waste. Neeli just slammed down the phone and within moments, she and Rashi had raced down the apartment stairs and were on their way to the hospital. Neeli was a strong girl but the tension could be seen clearly on her face. Now, she tried to keep herself calm and drive to the hospital, where Jiya was admitted. She shot a sideways glance at her mother. Rashi had not uttered a single word, in the last ten minutes. Neeli did not expect her mother to be calm in any such crisis but this complete lack of reaction, she found strangely disturbing. Rashi was now sitting very stiff, looking vacantly ahead of her. There was a strange, bewildered look in her eyes, as if she had the premonition of the worst. Neeli was too young to remember, but so Rashi had looked when all those years ago, they had informed her about Aakaash’s fatal accident.

CHAPTER VI

The rain showed no signs of abating at all. There seemed to be an impatient air about it, as if it had a mission to accomplish and was irritated at not being able to do so.

Neeli had always loved the rains. Maybe being born on an intensely rainy day had something to do with it but today it jarred her nerves. She felt like screaming out to the heavens to stop this relentless flow of water, from the skies.

The little household, so gay and comfortable a few weeks back was now desolate. A death in the family is always painful and Jiya had been more than a family member. Heart troubles had ailed Jiya for the past few years, yet her sudden death had left a sense of aching loss, in its wake.

Trisha had broken down completely but it was Rashi, Neeli was more worried about. She had not shed a single tear. It was as if she was too grieved to even cry. She withdrew completely into herself, so much so that Neeli feared for her sanity and to her consternation Trisha instead of reaching out to her ,strangely kept away from her. To add to her dismay, Trisha, just a week after the funeral had declared that she was returning to USA. This action on Trisha's part had looked absolutely heartless to Neeli. She had tried to reason with her Aunt urging her to stay a little longer, for Rashi's sake but Trisha's mind was made up. It had been a relief when Rashi resumed her job, giving Neeli hope that the familiar activities would eventually soothe her to normality.

Neeli finally turned away from the window. She had decided upon something and her face was set in hard lines. She reached Trisha's room and halted at the door. Trisha was busy packing her things into her big suitcase.

“So, you have decided. You are leaving” Neeli said in an accusing voice.

“Yes, I cannot stay here any longer”, answered Trisha. There was a cold note of finality in her words.

“But why?” Neeli wanted an answer. “Why this hurry?”

“I guess I have been away too long. USA has been my home now for the last twenty years and it is time I returned”, Trisha answered without glancing at Neeli.

“So, you do not care that Maa is so upset. You will simply leave her to cope with it alone.” said Neeli.

“Your Maa is not alone. She has you.” Trisha's voice had a brittle sound to it. Her next words were harder and her voice more broken when she said “That is more than I ever had.”

For a few minutes, none of them spoke. Then Trisha spoke again. Her voice was more normal but tired, as she added “Your Maa will be okay. Do not worry. Take good care of

her and perhaps you should give up the idea of studying in USA. India too has good colleges. I am sure, you will do fine here.”

Whatever, Neeli had expected, she had not expected this. A change came over her, as the meaning of Trisha’s last words sunk into her mind.

“It is not really about India and USA isn’t it mashi?” demanded Neeli with a sudden edge to her voice, “You are running away again.”

A shiver went through Trisha as she turned to look into Neeli’s sharp eyes. Vaguely, she wondered if Neeli understood or truly meant what she said.

“You can not just run away every time”, continued Neeli mercilessly, “you have got to accept it and move on.” urged Neeli with the cruel wisdom that the very young always possess.

Her words, so simple yet potent and so like her father’s, Trisha thought.

“Maa is very beautiful but so are you Mashi, only in a different way.” It had taken Neeli a lot of courage to say this but what she was going to say now was even harsher, so she steeled herself before continuing.

“I understand perfectly. You were compared to Maa all the time. She was the loved one. You could not help being jealous but you could not bear it any longer when even Baba preferred her and not you. You loved Baba. Didn’t you? And Baba chose Maa. You could never really accept that and so you went away.” Went on Neeli, “But all this is in the past. Baba is dead now. After all, she is your sister and she has lost so much. She lost her husband all those years back and now you both have lost your beloved Gypsy. No one can understand her pain better than you. She needs you now. Don’t you see?”

Her next words were almost a whisper. “Do not be so cruel. She looks at you with such imploring eyes!”

A short and heavy silence followed and then Neeli spoke again. Her voice was now firm and explanatory. “I understand that you were jealous and maybe angry also with Maa but have you not had enough revenge? Maa, for all her fairy tale romance, has been a widow for all these years while you did have a husband and son.”

Trisha had started as she listened and there was a wild, defensive look in her eyes, as she watched Neeli utter the hard words. There was also a searching look in her eyes, as if she wished to make sure that she had heard right. However, there was a smouldering look in her black eyes which disturbed Neeli.

Now, that she had started it, Neeli knew, she had to go on.

“Gypsy never wanted to talk about it but I guessed. You were present in that picnic, where Maa fell into the river. You and Baba had been talking to each other when it

happened and Baba jumped in to save her. I can understand that it was hard for you to accept when you heard that they were engaged.”

Neeli paused for a while and then continued. “I saw how you looked at Baba’s photographs in the family albums and I also saw how uncomfortable it made Gypsy and Maa”.

“What else, do you know?” Trisha asked, with a fixed look in her eyes. She seemed to be holding her breath and suddenly she asked an absolutely innocuous question.

“You have never seen Aakaash’s letters. Have you?” Trisha was asking but her voice was lifeless. It seemed to be more of a statement than a question.

“No, of course not”, Neeli answered with a careless laugh “Maa guards them jealously. Even Gypsy could not touch them but you were the only one she ever showed them to, isn’t it?” Neeli’s voice, from being explanatory had now become strangely soft and sympathetic. “It must have been very tough for you” She murmured after a pause.

Trisha’s eyes were now completely expressionless but something in them urged Neeli to go on.

“Yet, these past few days, I have felt something strange about you two.” Neeli stopped, as if struggling for the right words.

“What have you felt, Neeli?” Trisha asked her voice very low and very urgent.

“I have felt as if you remember Baba more vividly than Maa. Maa seemed to love someone who was out of the fairy tales while you, you seemed to actually know him, the man he was. You also understand Maa better”, Neeli blurted out suddenly and looked doubtfully at Trisha, as if she scarcely expected anyone to understand her words.

Something strange had come over Trisha’s face, as she took in Neeli’s last words. She remained silent for a while and then her face hardened. She sat down upon the bed but she was no longer looking at Neeli. Her eyes seemed to be staring at something far off and Neeli realized that her thoughts had drifted deep into the past.

Her next words surprised Neeli. Whatever else she had expected; she had definitely not expected this. “Do not go to USA, Neeli. Rashi needs you here.” Trisha said and as an after thought added “She always did.”

Instinct told Neeli that there was nothing more to be said or heard on the matter.

In a disturbed and thoughtful mood, she walked back to her room. The room was tidy but a strange silence seemed to fill it like the rest of the house. On one side of the bed, there was a vase, containing some pink oleander flowers. These flowers had been picked by Neeli, almost two weeks ago. It seemed so long ago now. Jiya had been still alive then and the biggest dampener in Neeli’s otherwise cheerful life that day, had been the impending luncheon party the next day, with her mother’s friends.

It had always been a strange quirk of Neeli, that when she plucked flowers, she liked to pluck whole branches, containing not just the pretty flowers but also the leaves, still attached to them. Flowers, in her practical mind, looked oddly out of place without their leaves. This had always been a point of argument with Rashi, who had never approved of this practice. According to Rashi, flowers were the objects of beauty and it made sense that someone should wish to collect a bunch of them but the leaves only cluttered the vase and were best left behind. The above argument had always been put to rest by Jiya's thoughtful intervention that different people enjoyed things differently. After all, as Jiya always pointed out in these cases, Neeli's aunt Trisha also adored it the same way, so it was hardly surprising that Neeli should too.

Gazing at them now, she realized that the flowers were now completely faded. Obviously, they had been lifeless for some time but with so much tragedy around, no one had paid any attention to them.

She now picked them up to throw away. The petals, though drooping still had a grudging softness about them but the leaves, normally so velvety, felt rough against her skin.

She was about to leave when her eyes fell on the mobile handset, carelessly thrown upon her bed. Neeli belonged to the present generation, who were born with a phone in their hands. She picked up the phone, thinking ruefully, as how, on that day of the luncheon party she could have stepped out of the house, without it. Rashi's phone too had been switched off, so Trisha had not been able to contact any of them while Jiya had taken ill and had had to manage alone, with only the neighbours, in the apartment to help her.

Something about that entire episode appeared unreal to her but she was not sure what it was. Maybe, the sudden death had just blurred her sensations, leaving her uneasy and troubled. She sank down upon the bed, her eyes brimming with tears.

CHAPTER VII

“Why did you come after all these years?” Neeli had asked at the airport.

“To see you.” had been Trisha’s reply and as if to justify that, she had indeed looked long and hard at Neeli’s face.

The above words and Trisha’s look on that day, at the airport seemed strangely unreal now to Neeli. In fact, the entire episode of Trisha’s arrival and stay with them seemed a far away thing, as if it had never happened. Neeli was not a silly, impressionable girl but she was forced to admit that, analyzed in retrospective; Trisha’s brief sojourn with them appeared like a gust of wind that had blown over their lives. Neither had she taken anything nor did anything tangible remain of that meeting. Yet, the scene before her arrival and that after her departure was vastly different.

Neeli could not be sure if it had something to do with the absence of Gypsy or the abrupt departure of Trisha. These were the only sensible explanations she could think of, so she clung to them. Rashi had gone back to her normal life but something told Neeli that she had changed and the reason was not as simple as it seemed. A shadow had come over their lives and what bewildered Neeli was that she had no idea of the source of this shadow. It was like standing in a wide, empty field and seeing a shadow fall over everything but not being able to trace the object, which by its bulk had blocked off the light to cast this shadow in the first place.

Neeli’s own life had undergone a lot of changes in the few months. Instead of flying off to USA for her master’s degree, she had taken up a job. GRE scores were valid for five years, so maybe, sometime in the near future, she might utilize them, so she told herself. For the time being, she felt she had to stay here, with her mother, who was definitely not herself.

She had to grudgingly accept that Trisha, even while leaving, had impressed upon her the need to stay and take care of Rashi. Rashi had been surprised at first to hear of her decision and tried to talk her out of it but Neeli’s mind was made up and Rashi had not argued very long.

CHAPTER VIII

Neeli was sitting alone by the window, watching the rain outside. There was a strange brooding quality in the way the rain fell, as if it could not make up its mind whether to pour at all or stop altogether. This sluggishness of the rain had painted the scene outside ,a vague, slate colour, making everything seem hazy and petulant.

At last Neeli got up and went to her bedroom. She took out a brown envelope and a small box, from her closet. Neeli shook the box gently, to hear the sound. There was no doubt that it contained some jewel and the brown envelope enclosed some papers.

Why, she wondered for the umpteenth time, did Rashi want Trisha to have them.

Rashi, in her will, had clearly specified that these two items were not to be opened but handed over to Trisha, just the way they were found in her bank locker. She had also mentioned that if Trisha died before her, the brown envelope was to be destroyed, without its contents revealed and the box passed down to Neeli. No explanations were given as to their content or importance.

Neeli, when she called her aunt, to let her know the news of Rashi's death, had known nothing about this will. These details, when apprised to her later, had very much surprised her. It had never occurred to anyone that Rashi should make a will. Neeli was her only daughter and therefore the sole heir to whatever she left behind.

Something told Neeli that she had gone through the entire process, just to include the instructions about leaving these two objects to Trisha. Why then, had she not given these things to Trisha directly? Moreover, why did she not want anyone except Trisha to see them? Rashi had always seemed so open that such mysterious actions on her part puzzled Neeli.

The brown envelope was firmly sealed and the box was locked. The key of this box had also been found in the same bank locker, inside a small white, sealed envelope, accompanied by a brief letter. This letter, addressed to Neeli had been a repetition of the same instructions, mentioned in the will, about the fate of these two objects.

I can , of course ,open the box right now and satisfy my curiosity, Neeli mused. Then she sighed because she knew she would never do that. It would feel like breaking a promise and Neeli was too conscientious to disregard her mother's last wishes.

The rain had become more sluggish, making the outsides look even hazier than before.

CHAPTER IX

Neeli was feeling restless. Once again, she was at the airport, waiting to receive her aunt Trisha and her mind went back to the last time she had been here, for the same purpose. Almost everything was different this time. To begin with, she was alone today, while on the earlier occasion, she had been accompanied by Rashi. The flight too was late unlike that day and there was no Gypsy waiting at home to welcome the visitor. A strange reluctance seemed to be gnawing at her heart and she suspected that Trisha too had been reluctant about making this trip.

Yet, the decision to come down had been Trisha's herself. Neeli, after knowing the terms of the will had apprised Trisha about the two articles, left by Rashi for her. She had offered to courier them to her but Trisha had surprised her by saying that she would come down in person, to take possession of them. Neeli's natural curiosity had been piqued but her instinct forbade her from asking any questions. There had been a strange weariness in her voice, on hearing the news, almost as if she had been expecting it. Neeli, after hanging up had found herself wondering as how the news must have hit her Aunt. Had she been indifferent or had she actually felt relieved that her beautiful sibling who had overshadowed her entire childhood was finally dead? Neeli could not be sure.

Neeli was an intelligent girl but she had to admit that Trisha's behaviour, two years back had perplexed her. Even in the midst of feeling indignant and angry at Trisha's obstinacy about leaving immediately, something had confused her. Something, she felt, she was not understanding fully. It was like playing one of those party games, in which they showed you a table full of several items and then sent you away, while they made some changes to it. Later, you were asked to identify the changes and though you realized that the scene was not exactly the same as before, you are not able to point out the difference. It was as if the carefully maintained usualness distracted you from discovering the changes.

Now, as she waited, it suddenly struck her that today happened to be the 24th of September. It had been her mother's birthday yesterday. Maybe, that was why she felt so wretched. I miss her, she thought sadly. Hot tears rushed to her eyes and therefore when Trisha finally arrived, the first glimpse she had of her, was blurred, though she was quick to regain her self control and dry her eyes.

The plane had been full one hour late.

“By the way, Happy Belated Birthday Mashi!” said Neeli smiling, as they drove home.

Trisha's smile was a knowing smile, as she corrected Neeli. “It is not belated. My birthday is today.”

“How can that be? Mother's birthday was yesterday and you two were twins!” Neeli argued.

“Yes, we were twins but what you don’t know is that I was born twenty two minutes after your mother, which was after midnight, so that the date just got changed in my case.”

“Oh! My God! I never knew that. How very intriguing”, Neeli was genuinely surprised.

“Yes, not everybody is aware of it. Our birthdays, you see, were always celebrated on the 23rd of September, with our mother remembering that date, she went into labour. So, it was actually Rashi’s birthday that I always got wished on.” Trisha explained.

“Did you ever protest?”

“No, it did not seem worth, though I pointed out some times, like I did just now. For Maa, 23rd was the day but *Baba* was more for accuracy. That is why, all my official papers record it correctly and I myself know that 24th September is my date of birth.” There was no bitterness in Trisha’s voice but an amused smile played about her lips, as she clarified.

“Fact is indeed stranger than fiction. Who would think that a pair of twins can have different birthdays?”

Trisha only smiled at Neeli’s comment. Neeli’s mind was however working on some other ideas. So even Mashie’s birthday had been overshadowed, by Maa’s date of birthday celebration, she thought. It was only natural that Trisha should be resentful of her sibling.

Afraid, that her silence may betray her thoughts, she babbled on. “Oh! Then you are a Libran while Mother was a Virgo. We all have different zodiacs then. I am a Cancerian and father was an Aquarius.”

“Twenty two minutes! And they are so different from each other.” Neeli thought. She wondered if the time difference and the consequent belonging to different sun signs really mattered that much. It was a silly and superstitious idea but she could not dismiss it from her mind, as they drove home.

CHAPTER X

Neeli was on her way home. It had been a busy day in office but an uneasy feeling was bothering her. There was something, she exasperatedly muttered to herself, that seemed out of place but she did not know what it was. It was as if a piece of a puzzle, she knew she had arranged correctly, was sorely sticking out. Something she had heard between yesterday and today.

Was it that silly discussion which her colleague Maya had started, during the lunch hour, about the zodiac signs? She had given a silly but rather entertaining lecture about the compatibilities between people of various zodiac signs. There were, certain zodiac sign combinations, she had insisted, that were simply made for each other, while some that were sure to result in absolutely disastrous relationships. She had given examples. She seemed quite an expert on the subject. Neeli had enjoyed listening to her animated lecture on the topic but what a pack of rubbish all this was, she thought. Yet, she had heard people actually believe in these predictions. Maybe, all this was part of the precautionary measures that people undertook before deciding upon marriages. Call it astrology or simply superstition, people in seriousness as well as fun, did dabble in them, especially young girls, with romantic minds. She corrected herself. Not only young girls but even young men enjoyed these perhaps or maybe, they just pretended to because the young girls did.

Even Maa had been teased always about the romantic comment, father had written, while courting her? *“Even our zodiacs just will us to be together and nothing can satisfy my thirst for you but your love”*. Jiya, in her candid moments had sometimes, raked up this romantic line, embarrassing Rashi, though it had always amused the adolescent Neeli. Maybe, this teasing had been all the more because this had been the only secret communication to have ever leaked out for public display. In fact, this note had been in Neeli’s possession for some time. All other letters, from father had been, of course secretly guarded by Maa, with Maashi being the only one, who had been permitted to have a look at them.

Neeli smiled to herself. It was funny indeed to imagine the love affair of your parents but you could not deny it, could you?

Neeli further continued her train of thoughts. Maa had been a Virgo. Maashi was a Libran. Father had been an Aquarian and she herself was a Cancerian. She wondered, as what the zodiac sciences predicted about their mutual relations. Was Maa’s Virgo compatible with Baba’s Aquarius, as Baba had declared all those years ago?

“You see, I am an Aquarian. So, my best match is Libra.” Maya had declared authoritatively.

“Well then what is your fiancé’s zodiac sign? Is he a Libran?” Neeli had enquired.

“Yes, Ajay is a Libran. That is, well, the ideal combination.” Maya replied. “I am glad that at least, he is not a Virgo. As per sun signs, Aquarius and Virgo just don’t go together.”

“Good! That means, you and Ajay have a fair chance of living happily ever after, then”, Neeli had commented, with a smile.

So, that had been Maya’s optimistic verdict upon the issue. Being the perfect Libra-Aquarius match, Maya and Ajay had a fair chance at happiness-ever-after while a Virgo-Aquarius match would have been an absolute disaster.

“Hmm! seems that even your zodiacs just will you to be together.” had been the thoughtful comment from the quiet, dreamy eyed Sheila.

Something stirred inside Neeli. Sheila’s comment! Where had she heard the same words? Then it struck her. Her own father had said the same words but as per the subject of sun signs then, he had been wrong! Father had been Aquarius and Maa had been Virgo. As far as zodiac signs were concerned, their zodiacs did *not* will them together. Then, why that comment?

Maybe, Father did not know much about the subject or attach much importance to it at such. That was not hard to believe but nevertheless, why stress upon a fact, decidedly wrong? Or was it, actually, not wrong? There had been no name mentioned on that note, Neeli remembered. Just this declaration that *their* zodiacs willed them together. Aakaash and Rashi’s zodiacs didn’t, as per Maya’s expertise on the subject, recommend the alliance, but there was someone else, whose zodiac was Libra, the perfect match for Aquarian Aakaash. Someone, who was also in the habit of being referred to as ‘Trishna’, the Bengali word for ‘thirst’, so implicitly mentioned in the same love note. It was indeed a queer twist of fate, that a difference of mere twenty two minutes duration, between the birth times of two twin sisters should categorize them under different sun signs, so as to prescribe different things for them, even if only theoretically.

She managed to step on the brakes, just in time for the traffic signal. In the bewilderment of her sudden realization, she shot a look at the sky above. It was deep blue and surprisingly devoid of clouds. So was her mind.

The piece in the puzzle was no longer sticking out!

CHAPTER XI

Trisha was seated on her bed. An onlooker might have thought that she was relaxing. It would have needed more than a casual observer to realize that she was anything but relaxed. She was uncomfortable, restless and in a strange way, very exhausted.

The brown envelope, mentioned earlier, was open on her lap. She had read its contents, not once but several times, during the day. Neeli, having gone to office, she had been free to do so, in complete privacy.

The accompanying box was still unopened but unlike Neeli, it held no suspense for her. She knew what it contained. Once, it had meant so much to her, not just for its beauty but more for what it had signified. Honour, love, respect, - such precious words and they had all seemed to be contained in that glowing sapphire stone locket, now lying in that small box before her. How strange, she thought. People have always loved to express the softest of their emotions through the hardest of the stones. Not that any stone would suit the purpose. It would have to be an especially beautiful piece, as this one was, wrought mercilessly by nature and carefully shaped by the jewelers.

She finally opened the box and nestled the locket in the palm of her hand. It sparkled just as it had all those years back. Neither the purity of the stone nor the glint of the sunrays, falling on it, had lost any of their fervor. They still complemented each other beautifully, giving out an aura of pure, glittering light. A bright, flaming jewel, that seemed to have a life of its own. Thirsty! Yes, that is how Aakaash had described it and so he had playfully named it as 'Trishna', meaning 'thirst' in Bengali. It seemed to have a mighty thirst for all the light it could get. Almost every ray of light in its vicinity seemed to be trapped in its confines, making it blaze and glitter like fire. Maybe that was the reason why Aakaash's mother, among all her jewels had prized this one the most. Aakaash himself, as token to his mother's memory, had pledged that no one else but only the love of his life should wear this beauty. Rashi had therefore inherited it and now it was left to Trisha.

Trisha, for the zillionth time that day, picked up Rashi's letter and reread it, as the diamond continued to sparkle on her palm.

Dear Trisha,

There is no space for make-believe any more. I am returning 'Trishna' to you and also the letters. I should have done so years ago. Maybe a lot of unwanted mess could have been avoided, had I done so. You were the Trishna to whom this 'Trishna' always belonged to.

Maybe, that is why, it never brought me anything but pain and loss. I took what was yours but like Aakaash's love, it never really became mine. Even though, remaining with me, it maintained its allegiance to you.

You always said that burdens are for shoulders which can carry them. You quoted Scarlet O Hara, the protagonist of the novel ‘Gone with the wind’, when you said this. I humbly accept that in the battle of our lives, yours were always the shoulders that carried the heaviest of the burdens.

I have always envied your courage and austerity but what I envied most about you was your ability to ignore public opinion about yourself. You never seemed to care whether you were popular or not. So sure and so completely self – centered was your love for yourself that I hated myself for being just the opposite. All my life, I have wanted to be like you – confident and happy about myself, irrespective of the approval of others, but could never accomplish it.

What came so naturally to you always remained beyond my grasp. You seemed to have a well of confidence inside you, caring nothing for what others had to offer to you, while I always had to depend on the approval of others to nourish my sense of self worth.

Only you know how jealous this made me of you. Jealous of your self-assurance and lack of dependence on others and finally jealous of the sentiment you could inspire in Aakaash.

Everyone thought that it was you who were jealous of me because of my so-called good looks and popularity, while the reality was that it was me, who was jealous of you, all the time.

I was jealous of your independence and self-contentment. But more than all those things, I was jealous of your inability to feel this emotion of jealousy that has wracked me, since our childhood. Even Maa and Gypsy never guessed the truth, though I have doubts about our father.

Aakaash however had grasped the truth right away. Perhaps, that was what drew him to you. Perhaps it is the same with Neeli. After all, she is Aakaash’s daughter. More importantly, she is **your** daughter.

All these years, I have wondered as what really constitutes motherhood. Is it the process of actually giving birth to the baby or conceiving the baby in the first place? It is true that I nurtured Neeli in my womb and finally brought her into this world but never could I forget that her source was still you. She was conceived by the seeds of your body and only planted into to the soil of my womb. I have never been sure if surrogate motherhood really made a mother out of me or not.

Forever, dependent upon the judgment of the others (unlike you), I ached for someone to assure me that I was indeed the mother but could not, as it was a secret only I, you and Aakaash shared. Like countless other secrets, kept up by you to protect me, this secret remained between us.

It may sound cruel but I have a confession to make. With Aakaash dead and you settled in USA, I might have gradually got over all this insecurity, had you not stepped back into my life. Rather I should say, in Neeli’s life.

Neeli, with every passing day, was becoming more and more close to you. As if her resemblance to you had not been enough to remind me of the truth each day for the last twenty three years! I feared that if Neeli went to USA and started staying with you; nature would at last prove stronger than my years of nurture. Can you then blame me for trying to kill you? I never got Aakaash's love, though he married me, at your coaxing. After having accepted a husband in charity, I had to beg before you again, for a child, since I was incapable of bearing my own.

God had already given you so much strength. You could bear just anything but why did He have to try me like this, every moment of my daily life?

I ask you again. Was I wrong in wishing you dead? But, again I was to fail. Gypsy died instead of you. I knew it the moment I heard the news about her hospitalization. The oleander leaves that I placed in your salad were meant to kill *you*. How was I to know that Gypsy would come back the same afternoon and having had no lunch, share that fatal salad with you? Gypsy, who never ate salads, in the first place! I had so carefully arranged for her to be out of station that very day. Once, on the way, I bade Neeli to go out to a medicine shop on pretence of buying some digestive pills and while she was out, I took out her mobile from her bag and switching it off, hid it inside my own handbag. My own mobile, I had already switched off to ensure that if you tried to contact any of us for help, you should not be able to do so. I had already made up my mind to stay the night at my friend's place on some pretext or the other. I even lied to Neeli that I had informed you about our forced stay, at my friend's place.

Destiny however, had other plans. Gypsy died and you as usual, guessed the truth. I wonder how you did. Did you notice the Oleander flowers, decorating Neeli's room or was it simply your instinct?

I no longer wish to know. Somehow, it does not seem important any more. What was important was that you said nothing and just left. You did not tell Neeli anything either. I guess that is what defeated me completely.

I no longer care about losing Neeli. I could very well have confessed all this to Neeli. Only one thing stopped me. The disgust and humiliation she might feel on sharing genes with someone who is a murderer. I may not be her biological mother but I am definitely her own aunt and also the one who actually gave birth to her.

Something convinced me that despite the pain I have caused both of you, neither you nor Aakaash would have wanted her to know the black reality. Maybe, this is just a feeble excuse on my part, to protect myself from the hatred which I know, will flare up in Neeli's heart, if she ever learns the truth.

Whether she should be told or not, is a decision that I leave to you. You were never the one to depend on others for making your decisions. Unlike me, you always took your destiny in your own hands and proceeded to do what you thought was needed. Father was

right when he said that I was aptly named ‘Rashi’, for I believed more in destiny than you did.

For last some days, I have been wondering if, despite all your courage and strength, you have actually done the wrong thing after all. Maybe, you should not have sacrificed, all those years ago. Maybe a little selfishness on your part would have been better for all of us, in the long run. Maybe, you should have simply married Aakaash and left me to fend for myself. Neeli would have been rightfully your daughter then.

After all, as Aakaash himself said, “*your zodiacs **did** will you to be together and nothing else but your love could satisfy his **thirst***”.

You, Trisha, were the Libran, the perfect match for Aquarian Aakaash and you were also his ‘Trishna’.

We came to this world almost together but I hope to leave early. Aakaash’s letters and ‘Trishna’, the symbol of his love, were and shall remain yours forever.

Farewell my dear sister.

Rashi

Trisha returned the letter to the envelope with a sigh. All she felt was a deep sense of exhaustion. The struggle had been a long and weary one, fraught with sacrifice, self-control and loss. She did not know if she had won or lost. She could not even remember as how long she had been struggling.

The Oleander leaves, yes, she had guessed, when after Gypsy’s death, the vase, in Neeli’s room had glared in her face. Nobody else had suspected of course. People were only too eager to accept that an old woman, who already had heart troubles, should suddenly take a turn for the worse. There was no reason why such a death should ever be suspected of any foul play. Moreover, the symptoms of Oleander poisoning are so similar to an ordinary heart attack. They had both studied Botany, so there was no surprise that they had known this piece of information about the Oleander flowers. If Rashi’s original plan had succeeded, Trisha wondered, would there have been any suspicions. Even here, Rashi seemed to have been protected by her destiny, though Gypsy’s death and the consequent events had broken here in other ways.

Her mind went back to that picnic. It had been a pleasant day. It had been the day after he had sent her that bouquet of flowers, with that bold note, in it. Aakaash and she had been talking about so many things that day. There was always so much to listen and so much to tell when they were together. Conversation just seemed to flow. Aakaash already knew about her interest in astronomy and also her preference for being addressed as ‘Trishna’. Even their silences had a comforting quality about them. Everything had seemed to hold so much promise and hope and then Aakaash, in his quiet but firm manner had proposed to her. There had been no need for long romantic speeches. It had been simple and yet sweet, like the flawless blueness of the sky. The only romantic

gesture had been a firm grasp on her willing hand and a steady look into her accepting eyes, when they had been alone, for a brief while.

This scene, so placid and happy for them, had but shattered Rashi's world, when she had suddenly arrived and, in a spilt second, gauged the sentimental secret. Rashi, the possessor of several masculine hearts, had suddenly found her dreams shattered in the realization of that split second. She had not let out any reaction of course, but Trisha, experienced in her twin sister's ways, had clearly spotted the horror in those beautiful eyes, when for a brief moment, their eyes had met. Only Trisha knew that Rashi's accidental fall into the river had not actually been accidental but an act of desperation.

Had it been out of pure filial love that she had then decided to let go Aakaash for Rashi or had it been something else? Had it been mere habit on her part to let Rashi have her desire because she knew, had always known, that Rashi was not strong enough to cope with disappointments? Had it been nothing more than silly arrogance on her part, to presume that she was more capable of handling disappointments than her fragile sister? Was it arrogance on her part to have underestimated the fortitude of her twin sister?

Perhaps none of this was true. Perhaps Aakaash had been right, when on being requested by Trisha to marry her sister, he had cried out in anger, that it was Trisha and not Rashi, who was weak, for not having the courage to take what rightfully was hers.

All this had happened so long ago but every detail was so vivid in her mind that they seemed like yesterday. Maa and Gypsy had been sympathetic towards Trisha but no one had ever guessed the truth. Trisha had taken care of that. Aakaash had proposed and been accepted by Rashi and Trisha had removed herself from their lives, except to come to Rashi's aid, when the latter discovered her inability to bear a child. This had again been kept a secret and Trisha had again moved back to the states.

A sense of bitter sadness gnawed at her heart. Rashi and Aakaash, whatever their sufferings, were now dead. Like always, she was left alone to bear whatever burdens, they had left behind.

Rashi, in her letter had mentioned that it was Trisha's choice to reveal or not reveal the truth to Neeli. But truth, she thought, was such a proud entity. It always demanded to be presented either in its naked completeness or not at all. Half-truths were known to prove treacherous, sooner or later.

Aakaash had been right, all those years ago and so was Rashi, in her letter now. Perhaps it would have been better for all of them, if Trisha had just satisfied her own thirst and left Rashi to quench her own.

The jewel in her hand continued to sparkle. It too, like Trisha, was thirsty and continued to drink in all the light that it could get.

Meanings of Bengali Indian words (in italics):

Salwar kameez : An Indian dress worn by Indian girls, consisting of two pieces, the upper part, called a kameez and resembling a short frock. The lower part called salwar is like a baggy pant.

Pishi: Father's sister.

Children in Indian household usually do not call any one by their names but always assign a certain respectable relation to them, like aunt or uncle etc.

In this case, though Jiya is not a family member, she is still addressed by the children as Pishi, which means the father's sister.

Mashi: Mother's sister.

In Indian languages, each of the Aunts or Uncles, depending on their precise relationship with the individual is given a different name. So, a mother's sister is Mashi while Father's sister is Pishi.

Didi/ Di : Elder sister.

Maa : Mother

Baba : Father

Trishna: Thirst

Rashi: zodiac

Neel : Blue

Aakash: Sky

Sita aur Gita : A famous Indian movie about twin sisters ,who keep getting mistaken for each other, resulting in a lot of comic situations.